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AUTHOR Ward, Jerry W., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Samuel Yette's "The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America" belongs to an honorable tradition of African American writing, a tradition which draws attention to a necessary distinction between the promise of freedom and democracy and what people actually experience in their everyday lives in the United States. Yette's language comes from the practice of journalism, the first draft of history (as writing). "The Choice" is written in plain and vigorous standard English. Determining something about the language of honesty in "The Choice" is connected with pragmatics (the systematic relations between structures of text and context) in the reading process. The book functions as a model of how to read/study the text of America as a democratic experiment. The language of Yette's book refers ultimately to the deep structures of the struggle for "Lebensraum" in the United States. (RS)

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NCTE
November 19, 1993
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THE CHOICE AND THE LANGUAGE OF HONESTY

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THE CHOICE AND THE LANGUAGE OF HONESTY

Samuel Yette's The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America belongs to a honorable tradition of African American writing, a tradition which draws attention to a necessary distinction between the promise of freedom and democracy and what people actually experience in their everyday lives in the United States. The Choice enjoys kinship with such works as David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America (1829), Frederick Douglass s oration, delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, July 5, 1852, W. E. B. DuBois's The Souls of Black Folk , Carter G. Woodson's The Miseducation of the Negro, and Harold Cruse's The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual. In diverse ways, these works are honest. They do not bite their historical tongues about the state of being of African Americans in this country. Nor does Mr. Yette's book.

As an African American reader or the primary addressee of the book, I am compelled to ask how the language of this book participates in setting the parameters of reality. We have here a situation in which "I " (in the most collective sense) am at once the object of the discourse and the subjective consciousness that must affirm the truth or falsity of that discourse. To be sure, when a writer asserts that "I" must make a fateful choice about my living or dying, "I" am obligated to be skeptical about the language in which the warning is issued.

I have heard such warnings before, from such analysts of the American experiment as Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Baldwin, and I hear them

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currently from Cornel West. The warning in The Choice is not presented in the moral rhythms of the Bible and the black sermon as is the case with the writings of King and Baldwin; it does not strike my ear with the cold logic of Christian Marxism and philosophical discrimination as do West's words about race and nihilism. Instead, Yette's language comes from the practice of journalism, which I take to be the first draft of history (as writing).

The Choice is written in plain and vigorous Standard English. It is readable. Familiarity with the generic configurations of journalism allow us to identify the thrust of argument to be more editorial than disinterested. Select a passage at random, and you do not find the illusion of straight reporting.

> The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did little or nothing at all to break down the barriers at labor union halls that keep black men from getting a day's work and a day's fair pay. Nor did the Office of Economic Opportunity do anything materially to change the peonage of the mass of nonwhite citizens into a resource with economic viability of its own. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 did help add some 800,000 black voter to the rolls in the South in time for the 1968 elections, but beyond that gesture (at least 100 years late and incomplete), the Great Society pacifications failed on a grand scale. An establishment rationale for these failures hangs together only if people have been prepared to accept them through the dynamics of fault psychology, vested interest payoffs, and the successful dehumanization of exploited groups. (The Choice, p. 84)

What you do find are 1) references to verifiable documents, agencies, and actions and 2) judgments embedded in such phrases as **did little or nothing, anything materially, the peonage of the mass of nonwhite**

citizens, did help add, but beyond that gesture, pacifications failed, fault psychology, payoffs, and successful dehumanization. Whether this is the language of honesty is at issue , because objective and subjective modes of verification are operative. There is no emotion necessarily involved in acknowledging that the Office of Economic Opportunity did come into existence. There is an ocean of emotion present in acknowledging that 800,000 voters were added to the rolls if you (the reader) are Southern, African American, and over forty.

Determining something about the language of honesty in The Choice is very much connected with pragmatics (the systematic relations between structures of text and context) in the reading process. As one theorist has put it,

> not only do we want to represent certain facts and relations between facts in some possible world, but at the same time to put such a textual representation to use in the transmission of information about these facts and, hence in the performance of specific social acts. (Teun A. van Dijk, Texts and Contexts, p. 205)

At a very personal level as an African American reader (I want to declare how much baggage I have up front), involves ethics and ethos. I do have to believe that the language does not involve deception. I do have to believe that the writer is struggling against dialogic constraints (or how language means prior to his using it) in movement toward a truth about his subject --- the condition of African Americans as U. S. citizens in the late twentieth-century.

What I am drawing attention to is the fact that the language of The Choice does not resonate for my Slovian, Native American, or Korean American acquaintances in just the way it does for me. They do not hear the same

nuances, because they are not listening (nor can they) from the same historical and ideological position. The semantic import recognized in the words of the passage I quoted certainly does not function equally for all of us, even if all of us were African American. We may share denotations, but the connotations, even in language embodying well-reasoned journalism and common sense analysis, are radically different.

Given that the 1971 and 1982 editions of this book were promoted as "meaningful and instructive literature" about the issue of Black survival in America and might be classified as secular prophecy, I find that the language of the book (which is a great deal more than the sum of words on its pages) pushes me to theorize about interpretation of the text in a way that precludes the conclusion that what it has to say is not applicable to the post-cold war position of black Americans in the politics of late capitalism. Such would be the desire of anyone who claims that in 1993 the significance of race is at the bottom of the totem pole of gender, class, and economics. The Choice is not damned by its topicality.

On the contrary, after reading page after page of fact which Mr. Yette chose to analyze in terms of population management, I find that The Choice functions as a model of how to read the text of America as a democratic experiment. It is the non-fictional complement to recent essay-novels by Ishmael Reed, books that tutor us in how to deal with the facts of human existence in defiance of the "official" disinformation. The language of Yette's book refer ultimately to the deep structures of the struggle for Lebensraum in the United States. The book certainly has to be read in contrast to recent events and commentaries on those events, and I would claim that under severest scrutiny the language of The Choice does not lie or deceive.

My initial placement of Mr. Yette's book in a certain tradition of social writing was not arbitrary, not a gesture of canon formation. That was a gesture of my regard for the book's usefulness, the honesty it squeezes out of me. The highest compliment I can pay the book and its author is that here is a work that is pre-future. The Choice, like the literature to which it is akin, alerts me to what is at stake and what information I must deal with as I work to render the American body politic impotent in the matter of genocide.

Jerry W. Ward, Jr.
Department of English
Tougaloo College
Tougaloo, MS 39174